DIABOLIC INTELLECT AND THE NOBLE HERO:

A NOTE ON *OTHELLO*

OTHELLO, it will be very generally granted, is of all Shakespeare's great tragedies the simplest: the theme is limited and sharply defined, and the play, everyone agrees, is a brilliantly successful piece of workmanship. The effect is one of a noble, 'classical' clarity—of firm, clear outlines, unblurred and undistracted by cloudy recessions, metaphysical aura, or richly symbolical ambiguities.[1] There would, it seems, be something like a consensus in this sense. And yet it is of *Othello* that one can say bluntly, as of no other of the great tragedies, that it suffers in current appreciation an essential and denaturing falsification.

The generally recognized peculiarity of *Othello* among the tragedies may be indicated by saying that it lends itself as no other of them does to the approach classically associated with Bradley's name: even *Othello* (it will be necessary to insist) is poetic drama, a dramatic poem, and not a psychological novel written in dramatic form and draped in poetry, but relevant discussion of its tragic significance will nevertheless be mainly a matter of character-analysis. It would, that is, have lent itself uniquely well to Bradley's approach if Bradley had made his approach consistently and with moderate intelligence. Actually, however, the section on *Othello* in *Shakespearean Tragedy* is more extravagant in misdirected scrupulosity than any of the others; it is, with a concentration of Bradley's comical solemnity, completely wrongheaded—grossly and palpably false to the evidence

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[1] *cf.* 'We seem to be aware in it of a certain limitation, a partial suppression of that element in Shakespeare's mind which unites him with the mystical poets and with the great musicians and philosophers.'—A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 185.

'*Othello* is a story of intrigue rather than a visionary statement.'—G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 107.

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it offers to weigh. Grossly and palpably?—yet Bradley's *Othello* is substantially that of common acceptance. And here is the reason for dealing with it, even though not only Bradley but, in its turn, disrespect for Bradley (one gathers) has gone out of fashion (as a matter of fact he is still a very potent and mischievous influence).

According to the version of *Othello* elaborated by Bradley the tragedy is the undoing of the noble Moor by the devilish cunning of Iago. Othello we are to see as a nearly faultless hero whose strength and virtue are turned against him. Othello and Desdemona, so far as their fate depended on their characters and untampered-with mutual relations, had every ground for expecting the happiness that romantic courtship had promised. It was external evil, the malice of the demi-devil, that turned a happy story of romantic love—of romantic lovers who were qualified to live happily ever after, so to speak—into a tragedy. This—it is the traditional version of *Othello* and has, moreover, the support of Coleridge—is to sentimentalize Shakespeare's tragedy and to displace its centre.

Here is Bradley:

> 'Turning from the hero and the heroine to the third principal character we observe (what has often been pointed out) that the action and catastrophe of *Othello* depend largely on intrigue. We must not say more than this. We must not call the play a tragedy of intrigue as distinguished from a tragedy of character.' (p. 179).

—And we must not suppose that Bradley sees what is in front of him. The character he is thinking of isn't Othello's. 'Iago's plot,' he goes on,

> 'Iago's plot is Iago's character in action.'

In fact the play (we need hardly stop short of saying) is Iago's character in action. Bradley adds, it is true, that Iago's plot 'is built on his knowledge of Othello's character, and could not otherwise have succeeded.' But Iago's knowledge of Othello's character amounts pretty much to Bradley's knowledge of it (except, of course, that Iago cannot realize Othello's nobility quite to the full): Othello is purely noble, strong, generous, and trusting, and as tragic hero is, however formidable and destructive in his agonies,

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merely a victim—the victim of Iago's devilish 'intellectual superiority' (which is 'so great that we watch its advance fascinated and appalled'). It is all in order, then, that Iago should get one of the two lectures that Bradley gives to the play, Othello sharing the other with Desdemona. And it is all in the tradition: from Coleridge down, Iago—his motivation or his motivelessness—has commonly been, in commentaries on the play, the main focus of attention.

The plain fact that has to be asserted in the face of this sustained and sanctioned perversity is that in Shakespeare's tragedy of *Othello* Othello is the chief personage—the chief personage in such a sense that the tragedy may fairly be said to be Othello's character in action. Iago is subordinate and merely ancillary. He is not much more than a necessary piece of dramatic mechanism—that at any rate is a fit reply to the view of Othello as necessary material and provocation for a display of Iago's fiendish intellectual superiority. Iago, of course, is sufficiently convincing as a person; he could not perform his dramatic function otherwise. But something has gone wrong when we make him interesting in this kind of way:

> 'His fate—which is himself—has completely mastered him: so that, in the later scenes, where the improbability of the entire success of a design built on so many different falsehoods forces itself on the reader, Iago appears for moments not as a consummate schemer, but as a man absolutely infatuated and delivered over to certain destruction.'

We ought not, in reading those scenes, to be paying so much attention to the intrinsic personal qualities of Iago as to attribute to him tragic interest of that kind.

This last proposition, though its justice is perhaps not self-evident, must remain for the time being a matter of assertion. Other things come first. Othello has in any case the prior claim on our attention, and it seems tactically best to start with something as easy to deal with as the view—Bradley's and Coleridge's[1]

[1] 'Finally, let me repeat that Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in a conviction forced upon him by the almost superhuman art of Iago, such a conviction as any man would and must have entertained who had believed Iago's honesty as Othello did.'

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—and of course, Othello's before them—that Othello was 'not easily jealous.' Easy to deal with because there, to point to, is the text, plain and unequivocal. And yet the text was there for Coleridge, and Bradley accompanies his argument with constant particular reference to it. It is as extraordinary a history of triumphant sentimental perversity as literary history can show. Bradley himself saves us the need of insisting on this diagnosis by carrying indulgence of his preconception, his determined sentimental preconception, to such heroic lengths:

> 'Now I repeat that *any* man situated as Othello was would have been disturbed by Iago's communications, and I add that many men would have been made wildly jealous. But up to this point, where Iago is dismissed [III, iii, 238] Othello, I must maintain, does not show jealousy. His confidence is shaken, he is confused and deeply troubled, he feels even horror; but he is not yet jealous in the proper sense of that word.'

The 'proper sense of that word' is perhaps illustrated by these lines (not quoted by Bradley) in which, Bradley grants, 'the beginning of that passion may be traced':

> Haply, for I am black
> And have not those soft parts of conversation
> That chamberers have, or for I am declined
> Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—
> She's gone; I am abused, and my relief
> Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
> That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
> And not their appetites. I had rather be a toad,
> And live upon the vapour of a dungeon,
> Than keep a corner in the thing I love
> For others' uses.

Any reader not protected by a very obstinate preconception would take this, not for a new development of feeling, but for the fully explicit expression of something he had already, pages back, registered as an essential element in Othello's behaviour—something the evoking of which was essential to Iago's success. In any case, jealous or not jealous 'in the proper sense of that word,' Othello has from the beginning responded to Iago's

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' communications ' in the way Iago desired and with a promptness that couldn't be improved upon, and has dismissed Iago with these words:

> Farewell, farewell:
> If more thou dost perceive, let me know more;
> Set on thy wife to observe

—to observe Desdemona, concerning whom Iago has just said:

> Ay, there's the point: as—to be bold with you—
> Not to affect many proposed matches
> Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
> Whereto we see in all things nature tends—
> Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
> Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
> But pardon me: I do not in position
> Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
> Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,
> May fall to match you with her country forms,
> And happily repent.

To say that it's not jealousy here is hardly (one would have thought) to bring Othello off clean; but Bradley's conclusion is not (as might have seemed inevitable) that there may be other faults than jealousy that are at least as damaging to a man in the character of husband and married lover. He is quite explicit:

> ' Up to this point, it seems to me, there is not a syllable to be said against Othello.' (p. 194).

With such resolute fidelity does Bradley wear these blinkers that he can say,

> ' His trust, where he trusts, is absolute,'

without realizing the force of the corollary: Othello's trust, then, can never have been in Desdemona. It is the vindication of Othello's perfect nobility that Bradley is preoccupied with, and we are to see the immediate surrender to Iago as part of that nobility. But to make absolute trust in Iago—trust at Desdemona's expense —a manifestation of perfect nobility is (even if we ignore what it makes of Desdemona) to make Iago a very remarkable person indeed. And that Bradley, tradition aiding and abetting, proceeds to do.

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However, to anyone not wearing these blinkers it is plain that no subtilization and exaltation of the Iago-devil (with consequent subordination of Othello) can save the noble hero of Bradley's devotion. And it is plain that what we should see in Iago's prompt success is not so much Iago's diabolic intellect as Othello's readiness to respond. Iago's power, in fact, in the temptation-scene is that he represents something that is in Othello—in Othello the husband of Desdemona: the essential traitor is within the gates. For if Shakespeare's Othello too is simple-minded, he is nevertheless more complex than Bradley's. Bradley's Othello is, rather, Othello's; it being an essential datum regarding the Shakespearean Othello that he has an ideal conception of himself.

The tragedy is inherent in the Othello-Desdemona relation, and Iago is a mechanism necessary for precipitating tragedy in a dramatic action. Explaining how it should be that Othello, who is so noble and trustful ('Othello, we have seen, was trustful, and thorough in his trust'), can so immediately doubt his wife, Bradley says:

> 'But he was newly married; in the circumstances he cannot have known much of Desdemona before his marriage.' (p. 192).

Again we read:

> 'But it is not surprising that his utter powerlessness to repel it [Iago's insinuation] on the ground of knowledge of his wife . . . should complete his misery . . .' (p. 193).

Bradley, that is, in his comically innocent way, takes it as part of the datum that Othello really knows nothing about his wife. Ah, but he was in love with her. And so poetically. 'For,' says Bradley, 'there is no love, not that of Romeo in his youth, more steeped in imagination than Othello's.' Othello, however, we are obliged to remark (Bradley doesn't make the point in this connection) is not in his youth; he is represented as middle-aged—as having attained at any rate to maturity in that sense. There might seem to be dangers in such a situation, quite apart from any intervention by an Iago. But then, we are told, Othello is 'of a great openness and trustfulness of nature.'—It would be putting it more to the point to say that he has great consciousness of worth and confidence of respect.

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The worth is really and solidly there ; he is truly impressive, a noble product of the life of action—of

> The big wars
> That make ambition virtue.

' That make ambition virtue '—this phrase of his is a key one: his virtues are, in general, of that kind ; they have, characteristically, something of the quality suggested. Othello, in his magnanimous way, is egotistic. He really is, beyond any question, the nobly massive man of action, the captain of men, he sees himself as being, but he does very much see himself:

> Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.

In short, a habit of approving self-dramatization is an essential element in Othello's make-up, and remains so at the very end.

It is, at the best, the impressive manifestation of a noble egotism. But, in the new marital situation, this egotism isn't going to be the less dangerous for its nobility. This self-centredness doesn't mean self-knowledge: that is a virtue which Othello, as soldier of fortune, hasn't had much need of. He has been well provided by nature to meet all the trials a life of action has exposed him to. The trials facing him now that he has married this Venetian girl with whom he's ' in love ' so imaginatively (we're told) as to outdo Romeo and who is so many years younger than himself (his colour, whether or not ' colour-feeling ' existed among the Elizabethans, we are certainly to take as emphasizing the disparity of the match)—the trials facing him now are of a different order.

And here we have the significance of the storm, which puts so great a distance between Venice and Cyprus, between the old life and the new, and makes the change seem so complete and so momentous. The storm is rendered in that characteristic heroic mode of the play which Professor Wilson Knight[1] calls the ' Othello music ' :

> For do but stand upon the foaming shore,
> The chidden billows seem to chide the clouds ;

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[1]See that valuable book, *The Wheel of Fire*, of which the Oxford University Press has brought out a new edition at 6s.

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> The wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous mane,
> Seems to cast water on the burning bear,
> And quench the guards of the ever-fixed pole:
> I never did like molestation view
> On the enchafed flood. [II, i]

This mode (Professor Wilson Knight, in his own way, describes it well) gives the effect of a comparatively simple magnificence; the characteristic verse of *Othello* is firm, regular in outline, buoyant and sonorous. It is in an important sense Othello's own verse, the 'large-mouthed utterance' of the noble man of action. Bradley's way of putting it is that Othello, though he 'has not, indeed, the meditative or speculative imagination of Hamlet,' is 'in the strictest sense of the word' 'more poetic than Hamlet' (p. 188). We need not ask Bradley what the 'strictest sense of the word' is, or stop to dispute with him whether or not Othello is 'the greatest poet' of all Shakespeare's heroes. If characters in poetic drama speak poetry we ought to be able to notice the fact without concluding that they are poets. In *Othello*, which is poetic drama, Shakespeare works by poetic means: it is through the characteristic noble verse described above that, very largely, we get our sense of the noble Othello. If the impression made by Othello's own utterance is often poetical as well as poetic, that is Shakespeare's way, not of representing him as a poet, but of conveying the romantic glamour that, for Othello himself and others, invests Othello and what he stands for.

For Othello himself—it might be said that to express Othello's sense of himself and make us share it is the essential function of this verse, the 'Othello music.' But, of course, there are distinctions to be noted. The description of the storm quoted above, though it belongs to the general heroic mode of the play, cannot be said to exhibit the element of self-dramatization that is characteristic of Othello's own utterances. On the other hand, the self-dramatizing trick commands subtle modulations and various stops. It is not always as assertive as in

> Behold, I have a weapon, [V, ii, 257]

or the closing speech. In these speeches, not only is it explicit, it clearly involves, we may note, an attitude *towards* the emotion

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expressed—an attitude of a kind we are familiar with in the analysis of sentimentality.

The storm, within the idealizing mode, is at the other extreme from sentimentality ; it serves to bring out the reality of the heroic Othello and what he represents. For his heroic quality, realized in this verse (here the utterance of others) is a real thing, though it is not, as Othello takes it to be, the whole of the reality. Another way of making the point would be to say that the distinctive style under discussion, the style that lends itself to Othello's self-dramatization and conveys in general the tone and ideal import of this, goes, in its confident and magnificent buoyancy, essentially with the outer storm that both the lovers, in their voyage to Cyprus, triumphantly outride.

With that kind of external stress the noble Othello is well-qualified to deal (if he went down—and we know he won't—he would go down magnificently). But it is not that kind of stress he has to fear in the new life beginning at Cyprus. The stresses of the spiritual climate are concentrated by Iago (with his deflating, unbeglamouring, brutally realistic mode of speech) into something immediately apprehensible in drama and comparable with the storm. In this testing Othello's inner timbers begin to part at once, the stuff of which he is made begins at once to deteriorate and show itself unfit. There is even a symbolic foundering when, breaking into incoherent ejaculations, he ' falls in a trance.' [IV, i, 35].

As for the justice of this view that Othello yields with extraordinary promptness to suggestion, with such promptness as to make it plain that the mind that undoes him is not Iago's but his own, it does not seem to need arguing. If it has to be argued, the only difficulty is the difficulty, for written criticism, of going in detailed commentary through an extended text. The text is plain enough. Iago's sustained attack begins at about line 90 in Act III, Sc. iii, immediately upon Desdemona's exit and Othello's exclamation:

> Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,
> But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
> Chaos is come again.

In seventy lines Othello is brought to such a state that Iago can, without getting any reply but

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O misery,

say

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy, [167]

and use the word 'cuckold.' In ninety lines Othello is saying

Why did I marry?

The explanation of this quick work is given plainly enough here:

Iago. I would not have your free and noble nature [200]
Out of self-bounty be abused; look to't:
I know our country disposition well;
In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.

Othello. Dost thou say so?

Iago. She did deceive her father, marrying you;
And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,
She loved them most.

Othello. And so she did.

There in the first two lines is, explicitly appealed to by Iago,[1] Othello's ideal conception of himself: it would be a pity if he let it be his undoing (as it actually was—the full irony Iago can hardly be credited with intending). And there, in the last line, we have the noble and magnanimous Othello, romantic hero and married lover, accepting as evidence against his wife the fact that, at the willing sacrifice of everything else, she had made with him a marriage of romantic love. Iago, like Bradley, points out that Othello didn't really know Desdemona, and Othello acquiesces in considering her as a type—a type outside his experience—the Venetian wife. It is plain, then, that his love is composed very largely of ignorance of self as well as ignorance of her: however nobly he may feel about it, it isn't altogether what he, and Bradley with him, thinks it is. It may be love, but it can be only in an

[1]Who has described Othello [I, i, 12] as 'loving his own pride and purposes.'

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oddly qualified sense love of her: it must be much more a matter of self-centred and self-regarding satisfactions—pride, sensual possessiveness, appetite, love of loving—than he suspects.

This comes out unmistakably when he begins to let himself go ; for instance, in the soliloquy that follows Iago's exit:

> She's gone ; I am abused, and my relief
> Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
> That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
> And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,
> And live upon the vapour of a dungeon,
> Than keep a corner in the thing I love
> For others' uses.

Even the actual presence of Desdemona, who enters immediately upon the close of this soliloquy, can avail nothing against the misgivings of angry egotism. Pointing to his forehead he makes an allusion to the cuckold's horns, and when she in her innocence misunderstands him and offers to soothe the pain he rebuffs her. The element of angry sensuality is insistent:

> What sense had I of her stol'n hours of lust? [329]
> . . . . . .
> I had been happy if the general camp,
> Prisoners and all, had tasted her sweet body.

It is significant that, at the climax of the play, when Othello, having exclaimed

> O blood, blood, blood,

kneels to take a formal vow of revenge, he does so in the heroic strain of the ' Othello music.' To Iago's

> Patience, I say ; your mind perhaps may change,

he replies:

> Never Iago. Like to the Pontic sea,
> Whose icy current and compulsive course
> Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
> To the Propontic and the Hellespont ;
> Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
> Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,

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> Till that a wide and capable revenge
> Swallow them up. Now, by yond marble heaven,
> In the due reverence of a sacred vow
> I here engage my words.

At this climax of the play, as he sets himself irrevocably in his vindictive resolution, he reassumes formally his heroic self-dramatization—reassumes the Othello of ' the big wars that make ambition virtue.' The part of this conscious nobility, this noble egotism, this self-pride that was justified by experience irrelevant to the present trials and stresses, is thus underlined. Othello's self-idealization, his promptness to jealousy and his blindness are shown in their essential relation. The self-idealization is shown as blindness and the nobility as here no longer something real, but the disguise of an obtuse and brutal egotism. Self-pride becomes stupidity, ferocious stupidity, an insane and self-deceiving passion. The habitual ' nobility ' is seen to make self-deception invincible, the egotism it expresses being the drive to catastrophe. Othello's noble lack of self-knowledge is shown as humiliating and disastrous.

Bradley, however, his knowledge of Othello coinciding virtually with Othello's, sees nothing but the nobility. At the cost of denaturing Shakespeare's tragedy, he insistently idealizes. The ' feelings of jealousy proper ' he says (p. 194)

> ' are not the chief or deepest source of Othello's suffering. It is the feeling,
>
> If she be false, oh then Heaven mocks itself ;
>
> the feeling,
>
> O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!'

—It is Shakespeare's tragedy of Othello that the man who exclaims this can exclaim three lines later, when he next speaks (IV, i, 204):

> I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me!

Again, three lines further on he says:

> Get me some poison, Iago ; this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again: this night, Iago.

This surely has some bearing on the nature of ' the pity of it ': to equate Bradley's knowledge of Othello with Othello's own was perhaps unfair to Othello.

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In any case, this association of strong sensuality with ugly vindictive jealousy is insistent in Shakespeare's play:

> Now he tells how she plucked him to my chamber. O, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw it to. [IV, i, 140]
>
> I would have him nine years a-killing. A fine woman! a fair woman! a sweet woman! [IV, i, 181]

—'O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!': it is plain here that 'fine,' 'fair' and 'sweet' apply, not to Desdemona as a complete person (the immediate provocation is Iago's remark, 'she gave it him and he hath given it [the handkerchief] his whore'), but to her person in abstraction from the character of the owner, whom Othello hardly, at this point, respects. And the nature of this regret, this tragically expressed regret, bears an essential relation to the nature of the love with which Othello, however imaginatively and Romeo-like, loved Desdemona. That romantic idealizing love could be as dubiously grounded in reality as this is an essential condition of the tragedy. But Bradley's own idealizing is invincible. He can even say (p. 197):

> An ineradicable instinct of justice, rather than any last quiver of hope, leads him to question Emilia.'

That's no doubt how Othello would have put it; but for the reader—the unidealizing reader—what the questioning of Emilia (IV, ii) shows in brutal, resolute, unrestricted predominance is the antithesis of any instinct of justice.

With obtuseness to the tragic significance of Shakespeare's play goes insensibility to his poetry—to his supreme art as exhibited locally in the verse (it is still not superfluous to insist that the poetic skill is one with the dramatic). This is Bradley's commentary on Act V, Sc. ii:

> 'The supposed death of Cassio (V, i) satiates the thirst for vengeance. The Othello who enters the bed-chamber with the words,
>
> It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,
>
> is not the man of the Fourth Act. The deed he is bound to do

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is no murder, but a sacrifice. He is to save Desdemona from herself, not in hate but in honour ; in honour, and also in love. His anger has passed ; a boundless sorrow has taken its place ; and

> this sorrow's heavenly:
> It strikes where it doth love.

Even when, at the sight of her apparent obduracy, and at the hearing of words which by a crowning fatality can only reconvince him of her guilt, these feelings give way to others, it is to righteous indignation they give way, not to rage: and, terribly painful as this scene is, there is almost nothing here to diminish the admiration and love which heighten pity.' (p. 197).

—That again, no doubt, is how Othello (though as for satiated thirst, he says at line 74,

> Had all his hairs been lives, my great revenge
> Had stomach for them all)

would like to see it. But Bradley, in the speech he quotes from, misses all the shifts of tone by which Shakespeare renders the shifting confusion of Othello's mind. For it is a speech one might have chosen with the express view of illustrating that subtle command of tone which marks Shakespeare's mature art, and which makes the poetry of *Othello* so different in kind from that of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the two dramas consequently incomparable.

It opens with the accent of a contained holy revulsion, the containing power appearing as inexorable, impersonal justice:

> It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!
> Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!
> It is the cause.

Now comes a shrinking back from the deed:

> Yet I'll not shed her blood,
> Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow
> And smooth as monumental alabaster.

Tenderness here quite clearly is that characteristic voluptuousness of Othello's which, since it is unassociated with any real interest

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in Desdemona as a person, slips so readily into possessive jealousy. Now the accent of impersonal justice is heard again—

> Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men

—but the accent is so clearly unrelated to any effectual motive in Othello that the concern for justice, the self-bracing to noble sacrifice, appears as self-deception. Next comes misgiving over the finality of the deed:

> Put out the light, and then put out the light:
> If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
> I can again thy former light restore,
> Should I repent me: but once put out thy light,
> Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
> I know not where is that Promethean heat
> That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd the rose
> I cannot give it vital growth again,
> It must needs wither: I'll smell it on the tree.

Tenderness here is less specifically voluptuous sensuality than it was earlier, but we nevertheless remember:

> Get me some poison, Iago ; this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again: this night, Iago. [IV, i, 208].

And there is in Othello a curious and characteristic effect of self-preoccupation, of preoccupation with his emotions rather than with Desdemona in her own right:

> O balmy breath, that almost dost persuade
> Justice to break her sword! One more, one more:
> Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
> And love thee after: one more, and this the last:
> So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,
> But they are cruel tears: this sorrow's heavenly ;
> It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.

When she is awake and so is no longer a mere body, but a person, it is not sorrowful love or noble self-bracing to a sacrifice that she becomes aware of in Othello:

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Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip? [43]
Some bloody passion shakes your very frame:
These are portents.

Moreover, though Othello says

I would not kill thy unprepared spirit,

actually he refuses her the time to say one prayer.

When he discovers his mistake, his reaction is an intolerably intensified form of the common 'I could kick myself':

Whip me, ye devils
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
O Desdemona! Desdemona! dead!
Oh! Oh! Oh!

But he remains the same Othello; he has discovered his mistake, but there is no tragic self-discovery. The speech closing with the lines just quoted is that beginning

Behold, I have a weapon,

one of the finest examples in the play of the self-dramatizing trick. The noble Othello is now seen as tragically pathetic, and he sees himself as pathetic too:

Man but a rush against Othello's breast,
And he retires. Where shall Othello go?

He is ruined, but he is the same Othello in whose essential make-up the tragedy lay: the tragedy doesn't involve the idea of the hero's learning through suffering. The fact that Othello tends to sentimentalize should be the reverse of a reason for our sentimentalizing too.

For even, or rather especially, in that magnificent last speech of his Othello does tend to sentimentalize,[1] though to say that and no more would convey a false impression, for the speech conveys

[1]There is, I find, an admirable note on this speech in Mr. T. S. Eliot's essay, *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca.*

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something like the full complexity of Othello's simple nature, and in the total effect the simplicity is tragic and grand. The quiet beginning gives us the man of action with his habit of effortless authority:

> Soft you ; a word or two before you go.
> I have done the State some service, and they know't.
> No more of that. I pray you in your letters,
> When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
> Speak of me as I am ; nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice . . .

Othello really is, we cannot doubt, the stoic-captain whose few words know their full sufficiency: up to this point we cannot say he dramatizes himself, he simply *is*. But then, in a marvellous way (if we consider Shakespeare's art), the emotion works itself up until in less than half-a-dozen lines the stoic of few words is eloquently weeping. With

> then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely but too well,

the epigrammatic terseness of the dispatch, the dictated dispatch, begins to quiver. Then, with a rising emotional swell, description becomes unmistakably self-dramatization—self-dramatization as un-self-comprehending as before:

> Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
> Perplex'd in the extreme ; of one whose hand,
> Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
> Richer than all his tribe ; of one whose subdued eyes,
> Albeit unused to the melting mood,
> Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
> Their medicinal gum.

—Contemplating the spectacle of himself, Othello is overcome with the pathos of it. But this is not the part to die in: drawing himself proudly up, he speaks his last words as the stern fighting man who has done the state some service:

> Set you down this ;
> And say besides, that in Aleppo once,

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> Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by the throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him, thus. [stabs himself].

It is a superb *coup de théâtre*.

As, with that double force, a *coup de théâtre*, it is a peculiarly right ending to the tragedy of Othello. The theme of the tragedy is concentrated in it—concentrated in the final speech and action as it could not have been had Othello 'learnt through suffering.' That he should die acting his ideal part is all in the part: the part is manifested here in its rightness and solidity, and the actor as inseparably the man of action. The final blow is as real as the blow it re-enacts, and the histrionic intent symbolically affirms the reality: Othello dies belonging to the world of action in which his true part lay.

That so many readers—Coleridge, Swinburne, Bradley, for instance—not belonging to that world should have found Othello's part irresistibly attractive, in the sense that they have preferred to see the play through Othello's eyes rather than Shakespeare's, is perhaps not after all surprising. It may be suggested that the cult of T. E. Lawrence has some relevance here. And Othello is not merely a glamorous man of action who dominates all companies, he is (as we have all been) cruelly and tragically wronged—a victim of relentless intrigue, and, while remaining noble and heroic, is allowed to appreciate the pathos of his own fate. He has, in fact, all the advantages of that last speech, where the invitation to identify oneself with him is indeed hardly resistible. Who does not (in some moments) readily see himself as the hero of such a *coup de théâtre*?

The exaltation of Iago, it has already been suggested, is a corollary of this response to Othello. What but supremely subtle villainy could have brought to this kind of ruin the hero whose perfect nobility we admire and love? Bradley concludes that

> 'to compare Iago with the Satan of *Paradise Lost* seems almost absurd, so immensely does Shakespeare's man exceed Milton's fiend in evil.' (p. 206).

However, to be fair to Bradley, we must add that he also finds

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Iago decidedly less great than Napoleon.[1] Nevertheless, even if Iago hasn't 'intellectual supremacy,' we are to credit him with vast 'intellectual superiority': 'in intellect . . . and in will . . . Iago *is* great.' (p. 219). If we ask the believers in Iago's intellect where they find it, they can hardly point to anything immediately present in the text, though it is true that he makes some acute and cynical observations at times. The evidence of his intellect is the success of his plot: if he hadn't had an extraordinary intellect, how could he have succeeded? That is the essential argument. It is an odd kind of literary criticism. 'The skill of Iago was extraordinary,' says Bradley, 'but,' he adds, with characteristic scrupulousness. 'so was his good fortune.'

Yes, so was his good fortune—until Shakespeare gave him bad. That it should be possible to argue so solemnly and pertinaciously on the assumption that Iago, his intellect and his good fortune belong, like Napoleon and his, to history, may be taken as showing that Shakespeare succeeded in making him plausible enough for the purposes of the drama. And yet even Bradley betrays certain misgivings. Noting the astonishing (when one thinks of it) contrast between the devilish reality of Iago and the impression he makes on everyone (including his wife)[2] except Roderigo, Bradley comments (p. 217):

> 'What further conclusions can be drawn from it? Obviously, to begin with, the inference, which is accompanied by a thrill of admiration, that Iago's powers of dissimulation and of self-control must have been prodigious . . . '

—There we have the process by which the prodigious Iago is

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[1] 'But compare him with one who may perhaps be roughly called a bad man of supreme intellectual power, Napoleon, and you see how mean and negative Iago's mind is, incapable of his military achievements, much more incapable of his political constructions.' p. 236.

[2] 'And it is a fact too little noticed that he presented an appearance not very different to his wife. There is no sign either that Emilia's marriage was downright unhappy, or that she suspected the true nature of her husband.'

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created. But the scrupulous Bradley nevertheless records the passing doubt:

> 'In fact so prodigious does his self-control appear that a reader might be excused for feeling a doubt of its possibility.'

Of course, it is recorded only to be overcome:

> 'But there are certain observations and further inferences which apart from a confidence in Shakespeare, would remove this doubt.'

Actually, if we are to be saved from these doubts (those of us who are not strengthened by this confidence in Shakespeare), we must refrain from careful observations, comparative notes and scrupulous inferences. Shakespeare's genius carries with it a large facility in imposing conviction locally, and before we ask for more than this we should make sure we know just what is being offered us in the whole. The title of *Othello*, borne out by the dominating quality of the hero, tells us where we are to focus. As for Iago, we know from the beginning that he is a villain ; the business of Roderigo tells us that. In the other scenes we have no difficulty in taking him as we are meant to take him ; and we don't (at any rate in the reading, and otherwise it's the actor's problem) ask how it is that appearance and reality can have been so successfully divorced. Considered as a comprehensibly villainous person, he represents a not uncommon kind of grudging, cynical malice (and he's given, at least in suggestion, enough in the way of grievance and motive). But in order to perform his function as dramatic machinery he has to put on such an appearance of invincibly cunning devilry as to provide Coleridge and the rest with some excuse for their awe, and to leave others wondering, in critical reflection, whether he isn't a rather clumsy mechanism. Perhaps the most serious point to be pondered is that, if Othello is to retain our sympathy sufficiently, Iago must, as devil, claim for himself an implicit weight of emotional regard that critical reflection finds him unfit to carry.

'Clumsy,' however, is not the right word for anything in *Othello*. It is a marvellously sure and adroit piece of workmanship ; though closely related to that judgment is the further one

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that, with all its brilliance and poignancy, it comes below Shakespeare's supreme—his very greatest—works.

* * * *

I refrained, of set purpose, from reading Professor Stoll on *Othello* and its critics till I had written, as Bradley precipitated it, my own account of the play. Professor Stoll is of course known as, in academic Shakespeare criticism, the adversary of the Bradley approach, and now that I have read what he has to say[1] about *Othello* he seems to me to confirm where the critical centre lies by deviating as badly on his side as Bradley does on the other.

Professor Stoll, having first justified with a weight of scholarship my unscholarly assumption that the view of *Othello* represented by Bradley has, since Coleridge's time, been the generally accepted one, exposes unanswerably and at length the absurdity of that view. His own positive account of the play, however, is no less indefensible than Bradley's. He argues that Othello's lapse into jealousy is to be explained in terms, not of Othello's psychology, but of convention. Profiting by the convention of ' the slanderer believed ' (for the use of which Professor Stoll gives a long string of instances) Shakespeare simply imposes jealousy on Othello from the outside: that is Professor Stoll's position.

As we contemplate his string of instances we are moved to insist on certain distinctions the importance of which seems to have passed him by. When Shakespeare uses the ' same ' convention as Beaumont and Fletcher, Dryden and Voltaire, his use is apt to be such that only by a feat of abstraction can the convention be said to be the same. Who will bother to argue whether jealousy in Beaumont and Fletcher or any of the others is psychologically defensible or not? The unique power by which Shakespeare compels ' faith in the emotions expressed ' and beguiles Bradley and company into their absurdities is, of course,

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[1]In *Othello : An Historical and Comparative Study* (*Studies in Language and Literature, No. 2.* University of Minnesota, 1915) and *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* (1933). Professor Stoll's position appears not to have changed between the two essays, but I find his less developed style the more intelligible. The later book was reviewed in *Scrutiny* for June, 1934.

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recognized by Professor Stoll, though he cannot recognize with any sureness its nature:

> ' By the sheer potency of art Othello, Iago, Desdemona, and Emilia maintain, through all their incredible vicissitudes, their individual tone. And inconsistent, unpsychological though they be, their passions speak ever true.'[1]

To explain this potency, Professor Stoll, urging us to be content with ' mere art,' talks vaguely of ' tact,' ' delicacy ' and ' poetry,' makes play with analogies from music, and quotes Shaw's ' it is the score and not the libretto that keeps the work alive and fresh.' Elsewhere he can recognize that ' No one has more imaginative sympathy than Shakespeare ; but,' he goes on,

> ' he employs it by fits and starts, often neglects motivation and analysis, takes a leap as he passes from one " soul-state " to another, and not content with the inconsistencies of life, falls into the contradictions of convention and artifice.'[2]

This is better than talking about ' score ' and ' libretto,' though a critic who saw that and understood would make distinctions and discriminations that Professor Stoll ignores. The ' sheer potency ' of Shakespeare's art, the ' magic ' of his ' score ' (and where is the ' libretto '?) derives from his imaginative grasp of concrete human situations in their complexity and particularity ; his power of realizing a vivid here-and-now of experience as part of an intricate and coherent context. The convincing life of the verse locally and the more inclusive realizing grasp belong together ; the one is the index of the other.

There are, no doubt, places in Shakespeare of which one may argue that local vividnesses here and here, convincingly living parts, are not related in an inwardly grasped whole, and that Shakespeare has fallen ' into the contradictions of convention and artifice.' That would be an adverse criticism. But before we make it we must make sure what kind of whole Shakespeare is offering us. For instance, it is not intelligent criticism of *Measure*

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[1] *Othello : An Historical and Comparative Study*, p. 62.
[2] p. 69, *op. cit.*

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for Measure to say, as a dramatic critic did recently in *The New Statesman and Nation* (Oct. 16th, 1937):

> 'The author seems to have lost interest in it about half-way through, and turns a fine story to nonsense. (The Duke's character, if one could take it seriously, would be as curious and complicated as any in Shakespeare—a moralist who tortures people in order to study their behaviour on the rack).'

—To 'take seriously' means, it is clear, to regard Shakespeare's Duke as a historical person and judge him by the standards one would apply in actual life. But, for anyone who can read, Shakespeare provides intimation enough that the Duke isn't to be taken in that way—that he moves on a different plane from the other characters. And because of the obviously serious purpose it subserves and the impressiveness of the total effect it makes possible we readily accept the convention involved in taking the Duke as we are meant to take him.

But with Othello it is different. By the time he becomes the jealous husband it has been made plain beyond any possibility of doubt or reversal that we are to take him, in the dramatic critic's sense, seriously—at any rate, such a habit of expectation has been set up with regard to him (and he is well established as the main focus of attention) that no development will be acceptable unless the behaviour it imposes on him is reconcilable with our notions of ordinary psychological consistency. Other characters in the play can be 'convincing' on easier terms; we needn't inquire into the consistency of Emilia's behaviour—we accept her as a datum, and not even about Iago are we—or need we be—so psychologically exacting. His combination of honest seeming with devilish actuality we accept as, at least partly, a matter of tacit convention; convention acceptable because of the convincingly handled tragic theme to which it is ancillary.

And the tragic theme is centred in Othello. Dramatic sleight is not cheating so long as it subserves honesty there. We do not, even when we consider it critically, quarrel with the trick of 'double time,' though it involves impossibilities by the criteria of actual life and yet is at the same time necessary to the plausible conduct of the intrigue; but equivalent tricks or illusions passing off on us mutually incompatible acceptances with regard to

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Othello's behaviour or make-up *would* be cheating—that is, matter for critical condemnation. To impose by convention sudden jealousy on Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* and Posthumus in *Cymbeline* is one thing: we admit the convention for the sake of an inclusive effect—a dramatic design that does not, we recognize (wherever in the scale of Shakespeare's work we may place these plays), anywhere ask us to endorse dramatic illusion with the feeling of everyday reality. But to impose jealousy by mere convention on Othello is another thing. What end would be served? What profit would accrue?

According to Professor Stoll, the profit of 'putting jealousy upon the hero instead of breeding it in him' is an 'enormous emotional effect':

> 'The end—the enormous emotional effect—justifies the means . . .'[1]

This emotional effect, as Professor Stoll enjoys it, he represents as the product of our being enabled, by Shakespeare's art, to have it both ways: Othello succumbing to jealousy before our eyes acquires an intense dramatic value without incurring in our esteem the disadvantages attendant upon being jealous; there he is, patently jealous, yet he is at the same time still the man who couldn't possibly have become jealous like that.

> 'The villain, by all this contriving of the poet's, bears in this instance, like the ancient Fate or intruding god, the burden of responsibility; and our sympathy with a hero made of no such baseness is almost wholly without alloy.'[2]

—Professor Stoll, that is, in spite of the difference of his analysis, sees the play as the triumph of sentimentalization that it has appeared to so many admirers:

> '. . . no one in Shakespeare's tragedies more bitterly and wildly reproaches himself . . . Yet not of himself suspicious or sensual, he is now not corrupted or degraded; and amid his misery and remorse he can still hold up his head and declare:
>
> For nought I did in hate, but all in honour.

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[1] *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare*, p. 41. [2] *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

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not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme.

He is a more effective tragic figure because he can say that—because, unlike many, he keeps our sympathy and admiration to the end.'[1]

—The ' emotional effect ' of the tragedy upon Professor Stoll is essentially that celebrated in his own way by Bradley, and Professor Stoll's analysis, in fact, does explain in large measure why such a tragedy should be so widely found in *Othello* and found irresistible.

Fortunately we are not reduced to reversing the critical judgment and censuring Shakespeare. The dilemma that Professor Stoll and Bradley resolve in their different but equally heroic ways—the dilemma represented by a ' not easily jealous ' Othello who succumbs at once to Iago's suggestions—needn't be allowed to bother us. Both critics seem to think that, if Othello hasn't exhibited himself in the past as prone to sexual jealousy (and his reputation tells us he hasn't), that establishes him as ' not easily jealous,' so that his plunge into jealousy would, if we had to justify it psychologically (Bradley, of course, prefers not to recognize it), pose us an insoluble problem. Yet surely, as Shakespeare presents him, it is not so very elusive a datum about Othello, or one that ordinary experience of life and men makes it difficult to accept, that his past history hasn't been such as to test his proneness to sexual jealousy—has, in fact, thereby been such as to increase his potentialities in just that respect.

However, he is likely to remain for many admirers the entirely noble hero, object of a sympathy poignant and complete as he succumbs to the machinations of diabolic intellect.

F. R. Leavis.

[1] *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

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JEAN WIÉNER AND MUSIC FOR ENTERTAINMENT

Un homme enfin
Pour être humain
Doit prendr' pour épitaphe ;
J'ai ris jusqu' à la fin.

(Popular song, to a tune by Wiéner).

I.

IF one speaks of ' popular ' music one means, I suppose, any music which is composed to fulfil a social function, written in the first place without regard to its æsthetic value but rather as entertainment. But it is important to remember that what we now know as popular music is something of comparatively recent invention, and that only since about the beginning of the nineteenth century has there existed a sort of entertainment music which is recognized as being different from, *and even opposed to*, the ' serious ' music which is being composed contemporaneously. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (to confine ourselves to more or less familiar European music), there was no uneasy borderline between ' serious ' music and music written for popular entertainment or for occasional purposes, because music was then an ' activity of the people ' ; there was no class of popular composers fulfilling a different function from the serious composers, for the music of professional musicians was popular at the same time. Purcell, or Handel, or Matthew Locke, did not look upon the music they wrote for the theatre or for royal exhibitions of pyrotechnics as being less ' serious ' than the music they wrote for the Church—though it may possibly have been less solemn. Now, when the serious composer is becoming more and more remote from the general public and an ever increasing amount of

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